

The Tumult over ‘Bulimarexia’: Externalising Anguish-filled Experiential Realities through Iconographic Delineation as in Nadia Shivack’s *Inside Out: Portrait of an Eating Disorder*

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Abstract. Children and adolescents, of the present age, are much conscious about their body constructs. There arises a dissatisfaction, denial and insecurity about their bodies, when they gauge themselves with societal paradigms. In order to conform to ideal body standards set by society, they resort to self-taught unhealthy practices, such as starving or bingeing and purging to achieve the externally-pressed goal. This pushes them to be victims of eating disorders. One of the most common eating disorders is Bulimia nervosa, where the individual frenzily ‘binges without control and then purges to relieve the excess calories.’ The individual goes on to traumatize himself/herself corporeally as well as cognitively, to the point of saturation and then, badly seeks a way of escape from the monstrous pain that he/she has put himself/herself into. Under such a juncture, one avenue that can serve as a ray of hope from the tunnel of illness is ‘expression through externalization of the gnawing suffering.’ This article, by taking into account Nadia Shivack’s *Inside Out: Portrait of an Eating Disorder* – a graphic novel on Bulimia nervosa, explores how externalisation of physiological and psychological agony can be achieved by giving the ‘aching experiences a visuality,’ through iconographically flexible narratives.

Keywords : Eating disorder; Bulimia nervosa; externalisation; graphic novel; pictorial embodiments.

Thinspiration and Trauma

In the present era, children and teens are to a great extent concerned about their physical appearance and body habitus. One of the motivating principles for this seems to be the socio-cultural expectations on them to construct fetching slender bodies. Sathyaraj Venkatesan and Anu Mary Peter in their article, “‘I Want to Live, I Want to Draw’: The Poetics of

Drawing and Graphic Medicine,” put forward that adolescent girls, in particular, act upon a cultural coercion, forming an impression that their feminine identity, womanly beauty and self-image are defined by physiques of super-skininess. Therefore, the youth, in general, in spite of much intellectual emancipation, weigh themselves with such spurious imposing societal body ideals and feel discontented, distorted and perceptually impaired about their ‘physical image.’ With a view to affirming to the agreeable body measurements put forward by the society, they call on self-exerting detrimental practices and end up as victims succumbed to eating disorders. The victims, usually going crazy with the body images of slenderness, operate on extremes of either ‘starving the body without adequate food’ or ‘bingeing on food uncontrollably and then forcibly purging to relieve the excess calories.’ These two extremes are in fact awry psychosomatic disorders, prevalent among today’s youngsters and are referred to as Anorexia nervosa and Bulimia nervosa respectively. Being thin-spined, the individual goes on to agonize himself/herself, both physiologically and psychologically to an extreme fatal congestion. He/she thinks that the externally thrust powerlessness over his/her body can be overcome by exercising a self-initiated control, through unsound calorie control approaches, but the practices in turn are shockingly dangerous enough to devour the individual. Once entangled in the chains of the monstrous leech of an eating disorder, the individual feels tired of living a vulnerable deteriorated life, which would contain only unbearable trauma, ineffable pain and unworthy dilapidations. The victim craves for a way out from the dark pit he/she has fallen into and searches for a liberating brace that can offer a thin chance of redemption. One such possible rescuing channel can come in the form of ‘expression through externalization of the lancinating agony.’ To be more precise, this externalisation of the experienced corporeal and cognitive trauma, impacted by an eating disorder, can be exacted by pictorially embodying the lived painful realities as iconographically flexible illness narratives. In this context, by giving a close reading of Nadia Shivack’s *Inside Out: Portrait of an Eating Disorder*, a visual autopathography on Bulimia nervosa, this article brings out how graphic healing is effected, when the fragmented past experiences are identified, externalised, empowered and constructed through alternate visual realities.

Graphic Autopathography

Published in 2007, *Inside Out: Portrait of an Eating Disorder* is the debut graphic novel of Nadia Shivack, offering a raw and honest account about her harrowing battles with Bulimia nervosa, multiple painful relapses during her efforts towards recovery and her hopeless attempts at complete recuperation. Narrated through Nad, Nadia's alterego, the memoir recounts certain grave incidents that drove the author to frame aberrated perceptions about her body, lowered her self-esteem, stirred her agency to insecurity, created an overall dissatisfaction about her habitus and pushed her into the hands of the Bulimia monster. The iconographic illness narrative also depicts Shivack's thirty year long intense anguish-filled struggle, under the tormenting clutches of Bulimia, by employing a potpourri of visual narrative devices such as coloured sketches, paneled scribbles, symbolic strokes, sense-imparting light effects, thought balloons, speech bubbles, verbo-visual metaphors, spatio-temporal manipulations, etc. There are informative clinical facts and statistics as well that throw in a much required truthful awareness about the nuances of eating orders and simultaneously delineate the idiosyncratic physical and mental pain a victim undergoes due to an externally-pressed goal. Alongside, there are even advices for victims who are convalescing from disordered eating habits. *Inside Out : Portrait of an Eating Disorder* for the most part is an unrefined assortment of drawings, cartoons, sketches, scribbles and commentaries, worked out on napkins, notebook papers and a variety of other surfaces, especially after meals, when the author gets hospitalised for inpatient treatment of Bulimia, failing multiple sessions at self-reclamation from her adolescence. Determined to keep her food in and unleash her grappling Bulimic self, she utilises a palette of crayons to externalise her experiential truths of sufferings through iconographic symbolisation, bringing herself to a 'drawing cure.' Shivack feels cathartic, revisiting the trauma-filled past, recreating the emotional morass and processing the terrible woe of her illness, through her visual alterego or avatar, in an alternate world of iconography.

Alternate Visual Reality

Being born in New York and raised in Manhattan, the first few narrative cum illustrative panels portray Shivack's childhood to be an unhappy one, with a number of disappointments, forced expectations, failed anticipations, disturbed familial relationships, unaffectionate parents, non-

supportive siblings, inconsiderate friends, etc. When pedalling on with her already upsetting life, the young Nad faces reproach from her mother, a Holocaust survivor, for not carrying herself like a woman and being heavy. She is further chided by her family, friends and swimming coach for having a chunky body. Here comes the badgering cultural duress from the external society that snatches the power women have over their bodies. Gradually, Shivack lands up with perceptually impaired images about her body, low self-confidence and feelings of inattractiveness and inferiority. Compelled by the demands of her athletic ambition, the pressures of culture and the humiliating comments about her bulky body, Shivack undergoes a tough time starving, dieting and practicing weight loss regimes to construct a sleek body. However, due to her uncontrollable food hankerings, she frenzily overindulges on edibles and then painfully pushes them out, to get rid of excess calories. Such a wild and taxing ritual of bingeing and purging establishes in her a disoriented eating habit and makes her a victim to the eating disorder *Bulimia nervosa* at the age of fourteen. Shivack, through the initial panels of her graphic illness narrative, creates an 'alternate fantastical world of visual reality' with her alterego or narrative avatar Nad, the personified Bulimic monster Ed and other associated figures in her life. As a result, an iconographic recreation of her turbulent and chaotic life is made, giving place for retrospection and dissolving the inner obscurity. The author is able to be honest and brutal with her lived experiences of pain, when she presents them through her imaginary alterego, than her real original self.

Companionship to Dictatorship

The eating disorder that Shivack suffers from, can be looked at as an implicit representation of her goaded obsession with thinness and a response to the external societal imposition. Shivack renders a personification to the eating disorder and presents it as a stylishly packaged boyfriend, big and strong, with whom Nad is ready to travel with. Nad, at first, develops a treacherous affair with Ed (as she calls the eating disorder that she lives with) and places in his hands the power and authority of her life. This is infact, Shivack's way of exercising a self-initiated subjective control over her body and putting down any other form of objective dominance. The insertion of a relationship metaphor between Nad and Ed can also mean a positive manifestation given to the many dismantled relationships that she had come across in her life. The visual narrative in the successive panels goes on to portray the paradoxical realities in Nad's

life, where on one hand, her source of solace is shown to be Ed and on the other hand, her very trustful companion is presented to be hideously playing with her body shape and health. Eventually, Nad realises the true colours of Ed, when she feels herself being consumed by him. At the turn of companionship to dictatorship, the iconic symbolisation and the depiction of Ed changes from an adorable lover to a Bulimia monster, an alien fire spitting dragon. Nad feels herself to be a slave resident inside the alien monster, unable to release herself from its addictive clenches. Defeatedly, she says, "No matter how hard I try, I end the day with a binge and purge for relief and to shrink back down to size" (Inside Out, 22).

A Bulimic Failure

The haunting obsession towards thinness, along with the corporeal and cognitive trauma resulting from Ed, makes the daily scramble uphill towards the various dimensions of Nad's life absolutely intolerable and Shivack portrays it rather honestly, through her pain-emanating panels. Her debating self-cautions her against the externally ushered deadly fixation for thinness as well as its resultant fatal eating disorder. But Nad is unable to stir herself clear of the ghoulish monster, even after putting up a fight with him, by looking for fresh starts in changed environments at California and San Francisco. Nothing materialises and she gets back to Manhattan with her resident alien of the Bulimic dragon intact. Her bodily anguish intensifies everytime she sees her rotund reflection as well as everytime she binges and pukes; and her psychological torment escalates everytime she feels that 'she is nothing more than her eating order but a complete failure.' Shivack, under many instances, brings out the amplification of the meaning of her panels through 'expressive anatomy.' Squire in his *Graphic Medicine Manifesto*, says that comics use 'expressive anatomy' to "direct our attention to the meaning conveyed by the body and its movements, gestures, and postures" (49). Similarly, Shivack uses sketches of body parts, scribbles of reflective facial gestures and strokes of other non-verbal expressions, as visual metaphors to embody the lived experiences of her eating disorder. When the author presents Nad, her alterego, with a fat, round belly standing in front of a mirror, it is understandable that the author feels traumatic to have had a 'rotund reflection' because of her Bulimic self. Similarly, when she depicts Nad with mouthfulls of food or head, bent over a toilet bowl, the author feels the stinging agony of 'overindulgence and puking.' Thus, the anatomical

parts of ‘belly,’ ‘mouth’ and ‘head’ are expressive of a ‘mimetic approximation of trauma’ in Shivack’s life.

A Non-complacent Life without the Killer Addict

Despite knowing that the Bulimic monster can scourge an aching affliction to her entire being, Nad addictively depends on Ed for a complacent life – the addictive agonizer becomes a desideratum when Nad says, “Food is my God of happiness” (Inside Out, 30). This becomes the major reason for the multiple relapses at her recuperative efforts. Whenever she makes a determined choice to oust the alien from her system, forgive herself, take responsibility for her past and set right her disfigured present, the monster comes back with even more powerful confines of bondage, to tap down his victim. Very fittingly, Nad also, keeping aside her resolutions, welcomes him by being trapped harder than before, as the absence of the resident Ed leaves her with an empty body, insane mind and a non-complacent life. This route to recovery and back to relapse is cyclical, where medications and counselling give her a partial recovery along with a temporary relief from binges but never a complete cure. This is because an irreversible reclamation from her killer addict requires a productive cathartic outlet to vent out her repressed trauma, apart from mere palliatives. Many a time, she detests being known by her Bulimic label and wishes to have the freedom of a sparrow to work on a self-constructed reformed identity, when she pleads, “God grant me the freedom as a little sparrow to fly through and away from jail” (35). During such instances, where Shivack wishes to convey the agony encountered in a crude manner or desires for a release from the Bulimic prison, she wisely exploits on the ‘personal exteriority’ of autography, rather than simply sticking to the verbal narratives carrying an ‘unknown exteriority.’ She uses her handwriting to form powerful image texts in her graphic illness narrative.

‘The Binge before the Purge’ and the Temporal Flexibility

Shivack brings in temporal manipulations, while describing her painful fragmented, derailed self and her continuous grappling with the Bulimic monster. She, in fact, uses ‘temporal flexibilities and narrative time’ as instruments to detail the trauma she had undergone throughout her adulthood. Adducing Henri Bergson’s idea of clock time and subjective/psychic time, Elisabeth El Refaie defines and differentiates between chronological and narrative time frames in graphic narratives. According to her, the chronological or objective time refers to the length of the

period an individual endures agony, according to the real world clock measurements, whereas the narrative or subjective time looks at the entire phase of anguish suffered by the victim’s fragmented psyche as a single stretch of timespan (which may last just a second, a day or even decades in the objective time frame). The comic autopathographies mostly use narrative time so as to portray, in depth, even a momentary woe through a number of panels or present waves of pain experienced over years together in a few panels. Shivack depicts the pathetic and painful surrender she makes to the Bulimia alien everytime, after putting up an unsuccessful recovery battle with him, through Comida “The Relationship” (40), with reference to the narrative time. The objective time taken to go into such relapses and the resultant corporeal and cognitive turmoil experienced might be momentary but the author stretches the narrative time of the particular miserable moment to three whole panels to intensify visually the trauma undergone by her. Shivack presents how she feels “naked, bare and insanely, impulsively crazy and vulnerable” (42) sans the armour of Ed, which helplessly pushes her to prostrate before the fire spitting dragon. With excruciating torment, she thinks if she can ever be “more than her eating disorder” (34), but the monster mockingly asks her to eat, obey and die, having no better alternative. So, the narrative or psychic time taken to describe the affliction of Nad, approximates sincerely the intensity of the anguish suffered.

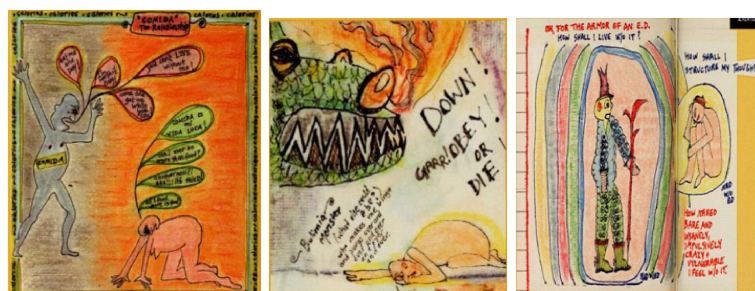


Fig. 1: Comida ‘The Relationship’
(Inside Out: Portrait of an Eating Disorder, 2007, pp 40-43)

Yet another panel tells the misery of being “trapped in the binge before the purge” (46), with the narrative time standards. In the objective time frame, bingeing and purging would have formed the most part of Nad’s

life, as she keeps wrestling with Ed for thirty long years. But the author flexibly adjusts the narrative time, by putting the waves of physical and mental agony repetitively experienced for three decades in a single visual panel, with pretty much gravity. Thus, graphic illness narratives do make use of the device of ‘temporal flexibility’ to stretch or shorten the subjective narrative time frame, with comparison to the objective time gauge.

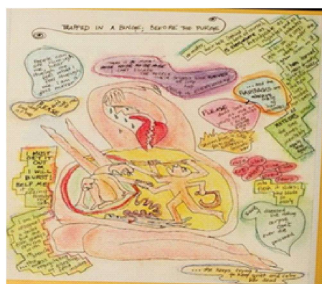


Fig. 2: ‘Trapped in a Binge; Before the Purge’ (*Inside Out: Portrait of an Eating Disorder*, 2007, p 46)

Drawing Cure and Graphic Healing

Shattered, decrepited, agonised and ruined throughout her early adulthood, under the deadly grip of the Bulimia alien, Nad has practically little to no goodness in her life. A series of melancholic visual panels portray the gruesome pain and the bedraggled life she lives in the hands of Ed. All she is left with is wild gobbles of food, ipemac laxatives, bad-smelling puked toilet bowls, throbbing aches in her disjointed body, outrageous voices in her head from the Bulimia monster, suicidal thoughts, pathetic relapses and feelings of animosity towards living. She is troubled by suicidal thoughts as well, unable to identify the purpose of her existence and she slowly abandons her already wavering attempts at recovery. On October 9, 1998, following agonisingly indescribable spasms, hyperreflexia and mania, she gets hospitalised for treatment at the New York outpatient clinic she attended years before, for reclamation of the self from the Bulimic monster. Encouraged by her doctor and psychiatric counsellor, she openly seeks medical help and starts receiving a comprehensive medical treatment for her Bulimic disorder. Illustrative panels portraying Nad’s path to recovery suggest how she is advised to

challenge any negative obsessive thought about her body and eating habits; hold a strong self-esteem; exercise an inexorable agency; practice the Bulimia gymnastics; go out on shopping; cook with her inmate; etc. Slowly, she starts limping towards real recuperation but feels an unknown bottomless, endless emptiness. In addition, she gets discouraged for not being able to assess the right amount of food intake and worries about overindulging or under-indulging. Doubting if she has really attained complete liberation from Ed just through medical intervention, she looks for some form of purgative externalisation of her traumatic past, to maximize the healing of her scars. She gets an avenue to relieve herself entirely from the claws of Bulimia, when 'healing through art' comes her way. Though she had thought about art and music as effective accompaniments during her attempts to convalescence, she never considers them to be great sources of cathartic and therapeutic outlet. But she starts drawing pictures after a friend sends her a box of cray-pas. She says, "I found that drawing after eating distracted and soothed me" (60). Shivack is able to shut off the provoking voices in her head and keep her food in, because of the digression she is able to exercise through the meditative quality of drawing. The intellectual and psychological drill of sketching her painful reality into a poignant visuality bars her from the suffering of the Bulimic trauma.

Externalisation of Pain through a Self-distanced Iconographic Narration

According to Venkatesan and Peter, in their article, "Anorexia through creative metaphors: women pathographers and graphic medicine," the creation of an alternate iconographic anguish-filled actuality backed up by visual narrative devices such as 'expressive anatomy,' 'personalised handwriting,' 'narrative time,' etc. gives place for anamnesis and externalisation of the experiential truths of suffering. Through graphic sketching, the author initially gets pushed into an 'intra-psychic affective reliving' of the agony of bingeing and purging, very similar to the actual trauma already endured in the past. But gradually, the pent up intra-psychic pain experienced is externalised and transmuted onto the constructed visual alterego, through a self-distanced iconographic narration. The author, by way of developing a visual narrative avatar, throws a distance between the original self and the alternative self and then eventually alleviates the internally recreated pain, by graphically externalising and perceiving the felt agony through the intra-psychic realm

of the visual alterego. The author, throughout the graphic narration, assumes that the narrative avatar is a completely different personality, undergoing the same pain as him/her and feels schadenfreudic as well as cathartic about having some association in visuality. Shivack, in a similar manner, relieves herself of 'the binge and the purge' disorder, when she graphically externalises her trauma, through her visual alterego Nad's iconographic illness narration. Moreover, the eating disorder Bulimia nervosa being visually personified as Nad's boyfriend and objectified as an alien fire-spitting dragon presents the horror the Bulimia victim would undergo. But at the same time, it exhibits how an abstract idea can be made iconographically tacit, giving the victim author recuperative thoughts of overpowering the illness.

The victim author is also capable of creating a community of sufferers through gutters and closure spaces. As Scott McCloud asserts in his work *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, gutter space enables "the human imagination [to synthesize] two separate images and transform them into a single idea" (66) and this process of filling in by "observing the parts but perceiving the whole [is] called closure" (63). Shivack, while wading through years of trauma in her graphic narration, leaves in considerable amount of gutter spaces between the panels. But she, at the same time, invites the readers into the intra-diagetic spaces to take part in the meaning building process between the gutter spaces and consolidate or close them together with anguish-filled logical interpretations. This, in turn, facilitates the readers to approximate the gravity of the illness experiential realities of Nad. Thus, a whole community of sufferers who have metabolised the pain of the victim author are created, when gutter spaces and closures used in iconographic narration, are capitalized upon.

A Creative Road to Recovery

In the panels of conclusion, where Shivack has lived for months without 'bingeing and purging,' she presents in a reassuring manner, how her Bulimic belly has become the palette for art. She says, "I began to collect hope. I've come to realize, after so many shared experiences with so many women who suffer, that each one has her own creative road to recovery" (61). When Nad starts exercising control over the Bulimic monster, she is able to keep the pea-sized shruken, defeated monster inside her stomach, in contrast to how she remained a prisoner inside the alien fire-spitting Bulimic dragon earlier. She says, "With time, I know I'll find more meaning and laughter and acceptance of my body" (62). In her

afterword, she confidently says that though there have been quite a few relapses, after the publication of *Inside Out: Portrait of an Eating Disorder*, she knows her creative road to recovery. Therefore, every Bulimic victim may try attaining a completely reformed identity, by understanding that 'life is more than weighing less each day' and by utilising graphic medicine with frames of strokes, colours and speech balloons.

Conclusion

A foisting cultural and societal duress upon today's children and adolescents, to construct ideally thin bodies, makes them adopt unhealthy eating practices like 'starving' or 'bingeing and purging.' Once caught in the hold of such terrible eating disorders, they agonize themselves physically and psychologically, to a point of even fatality. No longer being able to tolerate the distressing affliction, they crave for an avenue of release. One such possible way out can come in the form of 'expression through externalization of the gnawing suffering.' The externalisation of corporeal and cognitive agony could be achieved by the creation of an 'alternate fantastical visual reality,' portraying the lived experiential sufferings of the victims, through narrative avatars, alteregoes and other associated figures. In this regard, Nadia Shivack's *Inside Out: Portrait of an Eating Disorder* has been analysed, as to examine how Shivack obtains externalisation of the Bulimic trauma, through iconographic narration. The victim author takes refuge and haven in the iconographic narrative she creates and unburdens herself creatively through the verbo-visual medium of expression. Therefore, graphic recreation of trauma is by itself cathartic and purgative to the sufferers and in essence, creativity leads to catharsis.

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